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THE CURSE IN THE 'PARADISE EPIC'

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WHETHER IN 'PARADISE' or in the legends of the workaday world, the curse of the gods is, by all of its presuppositions, pivotal and normative. It is fundamental, therefore, that it be stated in clear and unmistakable language. Failure in this regard automatically eliminates unity wherever the curse is involved, since neither its prelude nor its sequel can be properly explained or related no matter how obvious either may be in itself. To state this otherwise, failure to relate the curse normatively to its context is *prima facie* evidence of a misapprehension of the curse itself or of the context, or both.

In spite of the fragmentary condition of the original of Langdon's so-called 'Epic of Paradise,' and the numerous divergences of reading made by experts after repeated collations, coupled with the shifting uncertainties of unilingual Sumerian interpretation thus far, there is a surprising consensus of opinion as to the general scheme of its contents. By virtual unanimity of opinion the text falls into two general divisions. The first consists of early myths dealing with the rise of agriculture and extends as far as Rev. ii. 38. The remainder deals with a divine curse and a sequel wherein new gods for the alleviation of disease are introduced and invoked.

It is clear that the two parts are very diverse, although each has a distinct uniformity of its own. It is equally evident that the curse marks their separation. The unity of the whole is not clear on any theory so far proposed, and the lack of unity may be stated as consisting primarily in failure to relate the context integrally to the curse. If this were all, then an hypothesis of unity might not be worth pursuing farther; but another fact significantly urges in the same direction. The curse itself has not yet been cleared of ambiguity by any interpretation so far available.

To begin with, the reason for the curse is not stated. Langdon's earlier theory that it was due to eating from a plant forbidden in the text has been given up by him although the assumption that such a transgression took place, *nevertheless*,

was almost immediately posited by him for other reasons, but without proof. It is obvious that the curse might be attributed to the caprice of the gods, in which case no explanation is necessary or to be expected, but if correct, it summarily disposes of the 'official' interpretation, there being no divine command, nor sin nor fall nor penalty. If the curse meant the loss of immortality, as more generally assumed, then at least the jealousy of the gods is involved and this should either be stated or so clearly implied as to exclude other motives. The entire absence of this feature would, in 'itself, seriously compromise this interpretation.

In the second place the relation of the curse to the sequel is particularly obscure. This is undoubtedly due in part to the unsatisfactory state of the text that immediately follows, but even more hinges on the curse itself. If the curse meant that man was to die, it is not at all clear why during the remainder of the narrative gods and men should be so contentedly occupied with the presentation of certain new gods of disease, without further explanation. Granted that the palliation of disease might well be recorded as a special divine intervention, it does not in the slightest alter the curse in that case, nor does it claim to do so. Again it does not certainly put off the evil day, for it is a not uncommon experience that invalids outlive the robust of the same generation; and besides there are many other even more dangerous hazards such as war, flood, and famine, that frequently curtail life to a much greater extent, yet none of these dangers are provided against. The one thing that the provisions against disease certainly do is to relieve physical ills; but, if this does not signify a curtailment of the curse in some definite way, it is difficult to see what integral relation the section can have to the curse.

Thirdly, if the second part be taken as normative and hence the entire work be regarded as an incantation text, this reduces the bulk of the narrative to an introduction that can be called such only because it happens to stand first.

May these incongruities be due to a misapprehension of the curse? What does the curse signify in itself, as its most natural sense? Fortunately there is no doubt at this point as to the reading (Rev. ii. 38). Everything hinges on the rendering of the particle *en-na*. Is it ever allowable to translate it 'when'?

It is agreed by all that it normally means 'until' and only the necessities of the context permit the use of 'when'; but being in a curse that is itself normative for the context, the most usual meaning is to be preferred. Accordingly it reads: 'The face of life until he dies, he shall not see.' It has been objected that this rendering, which is Langdon's, makes no sense because until man dies, being alive, he would be seeing the face of life, which can accordingly only mean 'live' (*JAOS* 36. 272). Undoubtedly it signifies to live, but to behold a person's face as a mark of the highest personal favor is too common a Semitic figure to call for extended comment. 2 Sam. 14. 24-33 will serve as illustration. Absalom's permission to return from Geshur was so far from complete restoration that he came to prefer exile or death rather than continue its provisions without seeing the face of the king. Accordingly, to behold the face of life is to enjoy its fullest favor, which not only includes, but expresses perfect health, and failure to behold the face of life will as inevitably involve bodily weakness and illness. If the writer desired to state the curse of ill-health and disease, he could scarcely have chosen more forceful language. In so far as the meaning 'when' is allowable, in the sense of 'at the time when,' it is at any rate of insufficient force in this instance, for the curse in order to be efficacious cannot be conceived as occupying itself solely with the moment of death. In reality 'when' here can only mean from the moment of death onward, that is, it properly signifies 'after' in this context (*AJTh* 21. 590), but as the basic idea in *en-na* is duration (*Sumer. Gloss.* p. 35) a meaning 'after' will doubtless not be pressed.

The curse as rendered above offers no evidence of a curtailment of man's longevity. One could with equal propriety assume that men were to live even longer in order that the gods might extend the application of ill health. Secondly, this rendering gives no hint of a loss of immortality, but in this respect might very well imply that men were eventually to become immortal (*AJSL* 33. 136). It contains no reference to disobedience, or a Fall, and it offers no new edict with respect to death, nor does it hint at mortality as a curse. Its attitude here is the same as in the oldest stratum of Gen. 3: of course man will die.

The most natural and unambiguous meaning of the line confines itself to the application of disease, and with this meaning the remainder of the text becomes integral without further ado, confined as it is to a representative list of ailments and their respective divine physicians.

We may now consider the relation of the curse to the work as a whole, and thus viewed our text seeks to account for and then to ward off the evil effects of the multitude of diseases bred in the Babylonian plain. These ever present ills went back to immemorial antiquity. They were as old as man in that valley. There, when the world was young, when only the gods inhabited it, Sumerian men came upon the scene; and in order to provide for human welfare, the gods by beneficent inundations and by teaching men the art of agriculture, inaugurated civilized life. Then it was, also, that the curse of disease was pronounced, a most striking as well as serious phenomenon for the Sumerians, coming as they perhaps did from a mountainous region. Every British soldier who has passed through the recent Mesopotamian campaign would readily appreciate the curse of En-ki. (The alternative rendering that would make the curse originate not with En-ki but with Nin-har-sag has the difficulty of making the goddess jealous of her offspring (*AJTh* 21. 590)¹ for which there is no evidence in the text as preserved, while in the sequel she is the only one who brings about an alleviation of man's lot.) Such an elaborate setting of the curse would not be worth the breath it takes to picture were it not to be followed by substantial alleviation, and accordingly it is agreed on all hands that starting with the protest of Nin-har-sag, the Red Cross work of the gods is adequately organized to alleviate the ills of mankind.

It is reasonably clear that the eight new deities who hold sway over as many diseases are themselves the offspring of Nin-har-sag (cf. *AJTh* 21. 591), who introduces them to suffering humanity. Indeed is it not meant to be understood from the word play between the names of these new gods and their homeopathic specialties (Dazima for *dazi*, Nazi for *nazi* etc.) that

¹ I was unable to consult Dr. Albright's article *JAOS* 39. 65 ff. before the present paper had gone to the printer.

Nin-ḫar-sag could be confidently expected to produce a 'Nin-flu-en-za' when the occasion arose? This means more than an alleviation of the curse. It provides for its theoretical annulment. Hence we have a real sequel and the whole is an organic unity, that is, from the standpoint of the curse, when once the latter is freed from ambiguity and late theology.

This conclusion would, I am convinced, have been evident to the pioneer workers on this text, upon whose combined labors our present knowledge as to its meaning rests, had it not been for the damaged and enigmatical passage immediately following the curse. I desire to apply the viewpoint stated above to this section, not with the hope of definitely solving its enigmas; there are too many unknown quantities involved for that; but at least for the purpose of stating the lines along which it should, perhaps, proceed, in view of the nature of the whole.

Granted that Nin-ḫar-sag, the Divine Mother of mankind, although voicing the curse, yet understood it as essentially hostile to her own interests, her appeal to Enlil becomes significant. Rev. ii. 41: 'I have borne thee children, what is my reward?' What is her concern, and what does 'reward' here involve? If the curse were her very own, then she already has her reward in its fulfillment, and her appeal to Enlil is out of place. Only on the supposition that it is against her interests does the appeal have point. She speaks as a mother, who therefore has a right to a reward from the husband, but she also speaks as a mother about to be bereaved. Nothing in the curse implies that she should cease to have offspring and hence her title of the Great Mother was not outwardly affected, yet her language distinctly implies that as matters now stand her child-bearing has been in vain. That is, the curse annuls her motherhood. This apparent discrepancy disappears in the recognition that motherhood is more than child-bearing. Under the curse her offspring are to pine and suffer beyond her power to help. All her beneficent motherly care for them was put in jeopardy. The appreciation of the mother instinct is finely drawn here. The pain of motherhood is vain if it brings forth offspring only to suffer relentless pain.

With this as her concern, it is possible to define the only reward that could have a bearing in the case and this can be very simply stated. The reward must save her motherhood in

the sense of sheltering nurture as well as child-bearing, but this can only be accomplished in the circumstances by obviating the curse. These considerations, if valid, would determine the lines along which the puzzling passage Rev. ii. 44 must be worked out. In the preceding line Enlil recognizes the motherhood of the goddess and therefore her right to a reward; and then in l. 44 he applies an epithet to her by which she is to be especially known in Nippur; and in view of the preceding it cannot fail to confirm her motherhood for the future. Such renderings as 'two creatures I will make for thee,' or 'two thrones,' etc., lack not in grammar but in meaning. I must leave the final solution of this delicate problem to my betters in Sumerian finesse, but merely not to seem to dodge the issue I would suggest as another possibility 'double source producing flowing (i. e. abundant) milk shall thy name be called' (*IIgiš-mal-ga-ri-dú*). In which case we should have an epithet that emphatically confirmed the sheltering nurture denied by the curse to the goddess, at whose breasts mankind had been nourished and was still to find fulness of life.

Rev. ii. 45-47 immediately following are most difficult and the translation in part conjectural. Langdon's attempt to make them refer to the god of vegetation, who does not otherwise appear in this column, only shows the desperate straits of the interpreter. The position of the lines makes it natural for them to be expegetical to the epithet in l. 44, continuing the speech of Enlil, with Nin-ḫar-sag as the active subject and mankind the object. With all reserve I would suggest: (45) 'In pain his head she alone fashions, (46) His mouth she alone causes to speak, (47) His eye she alone shall fill with light.'² All three lines deal with Nin-ḫar-sag's functions as the great Mother: first that of child-bearing; second, nurture; third, motherly care that assures complete fulness of life, poetically described as 'filling the eye with light,' a phrase in significant contrast with 'not seeing the face of life,' and intentionally so, for such fulness of life in the gift of Nin-ḫar-sag assures the triumph over the curse. If it be objected that these lines might as readily be construed as all referring to birth functions, this need not be

² For the readings involved here, cf. my forthcoming review of Langdon's 'Epic' in *AJSL*.

denied. Indeed they may have originally meant exactly that, having been taken, perchance, from some older ritual in praise of the mother goddess; but their utterance by Enlil at this juncture certifies, as the sequel clearly shows, a much wider application, namely, one that covers the whole course of man.

How Enlil's promise was fulfilled was once told in full in Rev. i, ii. From what now remains, the new deities that here appear are best described as the latest offspring of Enlil and Nin-har-sag. Their function was to bring relief from the curse of disease which had been laid upon Nin-har-sag's other progeny. Thus by her motherhood her motherhood was preserved, in spite of En-ki. So ran one canto in the great Hallēl of Enlil and Ninlil in Nippur in the best days of Sumer. Stated in everyday language, the Sumerians after a hard struggle gradually became acclimated in the Babylonian plain, and gave the glory to their old mountain gods.